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CONDEMNED TO LIVE



JOHN URSENBACH



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CONDEMNED TO LIVE



OCTAVE URSENBACH

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CONDEMNED TO LIVE

The Pathetic Story of
Ben Israel Who, as Ret-
ribution for His Part in
the Crucifixion, Was
Condemned by Christ to
Live Until His Return.

—OCTAVE URSENBACH.

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CONDEMNED TO LIVE

Canto I

Octave Ursenbach

A FAR off in Judea's land,
In David's city, old and grand,
Great Judah, through her joys and tears
Had lived "the law" a thousand years.
Her hope was in Messiah grand,
Who at some future time would stand
On Israel's choice and blessed sod
As Prince of Peace—the Mighty God.
Inspired men down through Israel's time,
Had prophesied in prose and rhyme,
That he should come to claim his own—
To ransom men, he should be known.
The Jews, then scattered far and wide
O'er mountain, valley, vale and tide,
Would be redeemed and gathered home,
No more o'er the dark world to roam.
The Hebrew-folk, the choice of heaven,
Lived "the law" by Moses given;
E'en though the spirit might have flown,
The form was followed night and morn.
They sacrificed of every kind
According to the Jewish mind,
In hope that future days might bring
Immanuel, their mighty King.
As centuries past their prophets bold,

[One]

Condemned to Live

Had oft the self-same story told,
Until the Jewish race 'most lost
Their hope in him, the Lord of Hosts.
Oft thought they that he tarried long,
Yet he must come, else why the song
And prayers of rabbis, firm and old,
Long centuries had the story told.
These Israelites so known to fame,
Lived on unchanged in life and name;
They wonderously preserved their race,
And longed to see Messiah's face.

Canto II

THE PROTAGONIST

BEN ISRAEL, a man devout,
The Hebrew faith had lived throughout;
A son of Judah, known to fame,
The Jews would laud and praise his name.
A rabbi he of great renown,
The scriptures had become his own.
This prelate, wise in laws of God,
Oft pondered on the sacred word;
Signs too were at his fingers' end;
All nature with him seemed to blend.

One day a son of Israel came
In haste, and called the rabbi's name:
"Pray tell me thou, Ben Israel great,

[Two]

Condemned to Live

What are these things I hear of late?
A man dressed in the skins of beasts
Has reached our country from the east;
Tells of Messiah and the Lord,
And many Jews believe his word.
'Repent and be baptized,' cries he,
'And from your sins and darkness flee,
For lo, ere long the Son of God,
Will come to settle sin's great load.'
Authority, he seems to hold;
Baptized are thousands to his fold.
Once as he stood at Jordan's side
And preached to Jews from far and wide,
Stopped he and gazed toward the bridge—
An man walked slowly o'er the ridge.
'Behold the Lamb of God,' quoth he,
'He comes to set his people free;
Sin's great load he shall take away;
Messiah, here this very day.'
The stranger, all could see a Jew,
The teachings of this preacher knew;
Descended into Jordan's tide,
While many people stood aside;
Demanded he to be baptized,
Of this queer preacher at his side.
Then when he 'rose and stood alone
A halo bright around him shone."

Ben Israel listened—blood ran chill;
Stared at the Jew so firm and still;

[Three]

Condemned to Live

Absorbed the thought as face turned red;
The silence broke, at length he said:
"Thou fool, with many other Jews,
Why wilt thou listen to such news?
Messiah will not come that way—
Will not appear e'en in our day.
This be his sign of all, the best,
In glory here from yonder East,
In pomp and station to his own,
The earth will quake when he shall come.
Not as this fool tells, preaching here,
Nor in this Jesus, some revere.
Heretics they of maddened brain,
This would-be king can never reign."
Alone, Ben Israel pondered deep;
Disturbed in mind, he could not sleep.
Resolved he there to wage a fight—
His plans were laid that very night.
This heresy 'midst chosen ones,
By heaven's help must be o'ercome.

Canto III

THE COUNCIL ASSEMBLES

ENTHUSED to save fair Judah's name,
Ben Israel, so known to fame,
Oft met with the Sanhedrim great,
Concerning things transpired of late.
Throughout Judea next he called,

[*Four*]

Condemned to Live

And gathered rabbis, one and all;
E'en from afar did many come—
Assembled in a gorgeous room.
To them who came, Ben Israel spoke:
"Brethren, this call is not a joke,
For, in the name of God above,
Call I you here in Israel's love.
From you I would to know the whole,
Of things that long have bruised my soul.
This John, down from the wilderness,
Who seems to preach such righteousness,
Speaks he as one sent from above,
And draws great thousands to his love.
Then worse, this hated Nazarene,
Has now through all Judea been,
And many Jews believe that he,
May our hoped-for Messiah be.
Call I you here from high and low—
Ye doctors of the law, who know
The word of God to Israel clear,
Down through all time, erstwhile and near.
Our faith is in Messiah true,
Who is to come and shall renew
His covenants as in days of old—
Our prophets oft have this foretold.
But of this man of Galilee,
Who fain would set all Israel free—
This low, uncouth, base Nazarene
Through all Judea's vales is seen
And heard each day, by throng and throng,

[Five]

Condemned to Live

Blaspheming God the whole day long.
So brothers, rabbins with thy vow,
Pray tell me true, what thinkest thou."

"Ben Israel," spoke a rabbi strong,
"That burns my mind the whole day long;
For days and months I find no rest;
My fevered brain is oft oppressed.
Some days ago I listened long;
His voice was mild as sweetest song.
Upon a mount, erect he stood,
Before a gathered multitude.
Some thought his doctrine sublime
Transcended all things of our time;
But much, to me, revealed a flaw—
Did contradict Mosaic law.
Imposter then I am sure that he
Our hoped-for king can never be."

"Ben Israel," a voice rang out,
"Let me speak next. I have no doubt
He is a low-down Nazarene,
For many years him I have seen.
Aye, all my life, e'en from a lad
Have known him well. The man is mad."

"But hold," quick spoke another Jew,
"A mad man can not such things do
As this man does. Not long ago
To Cana's feast I chanced to go.
Before my eyes, of unknown cause,

Condemned to Live

Outwitted he all nature's laws,
For, by some simple act sublime,
Turned jars of water into wine."

" 'Tis magic trick or gift of hell,"
From many come a vicious yell,
"For demons in past days and hours,
Have been possessed of kindred powers."

"Pray judge him not, friends, so severe,"
Spoke one. "You may him yet revere.
The lame have walked and leaped for joy—
Healed is the worst known leprosy—
To blind men he clear sight does give,
While some, though dead, are made to live.
E'en our friend Lazarus, laid away,
Gave he life after the third day.
We know these things transpired right
here,

Among the sons of Israel dear,
Yet, how 't was done or by what cause
Must be by some of nature's laws.
If this bold work has come of man,
'T will perish sure as it began;
But if it is of heaven's cause,
'T were vain to kick against God's laws."

Ben Israel spoke with maddened ire:
"I claim this Nazarene a liar,
For oft the rogue has tongued the word
That he is son of Israel's God."

Condemned to Live

"Base blasphemy," a new voice came,
"That he should claim so great a fame.
For me I with Ben Israel stand
To drive this rebel from the land."

"What saith the law?" a new voice roared,
"This blasphemer shall meet the word."
"Death," another voice rang out,
"Well written here beyond all doubt."

Some rabbins bowed and left the room,
While some remained to plot the doom.
The Jewish faith, though hell should roar,
Must be preserved forever more.
To crucify Him, idolized,
Conspirators were organized;
Ben Israel, the rabbi grand,
Was made the leader of the band.

Canto IV

THE CONSPIRATORS

THIS organized, conspiring band,
With plot well coined when through the
land,
Where mighty works each day were
wrought,
And words majestic freely taught.

{Eight}

Condemned to Live

Rang out a voice: "Hey Nazarene,
Thou would-be king. Long have I been
Demanding that thou give a sign,
That we may know thou art divine."

Thus spoke Ben Israel in his ire,
Whose mad brain reeled as though afire;
While all his ilk, like demons, swore,
This Nazarene should be no more.

His many trials that oft are read,
Were largely by Ben Israel led.
Conspiring councils oft were held,
Before which paid spies were compelled
To testify of works as seen;
On certain days where Christ had been.
Ben Israel next to Judas went
To weaken him for mal-intent;
Succeeded he that very day,
That he the Master should betray.

In Pilate's Court Ben Israel thus
Cried long and loud for Barrabus:
"This Nazarene is ours," said he,
"Must pay the price at Calvary."

Ben Israel while on the way,
Up to Golgotha, that sad day,
With scourging whip and fevered brow,
Insisted still that he should know:
"Hail would-be king of all the land,

Condemned to Live

We bow before thy great command.
The cross thou fiend, shall be thy shrine,
Yet, once again I ask a sign."
The answer came in whisper low—
None save Ben Israel that day knew,
But sweet, soft words with cutting dart
Profoundly pierced Ben Israel's heart.

Canto V

CONDEMNED

"**Y**E GODS above I quake and fear,
What makes my heart so faint?
Those sweet, kind words I always hear,
As spoken by that Saint.
Messiah? Yes, 't was He I'm sure,
All nature testified—
The earth reeled with a mighty roar
When this Messiah died.
Ah, I the greatest curse of all—
His murder I must own.
That sacred life atones the Fall,
But hope for me is gone.
Again that sign so tenderly—
That kind look in His eye:
'CONDEMNED ART THOU TO LIVE,'
said He,
'And I condemned to die.
Aye, live thou shalt until I come,

[Ten]

Condemned to Live

A wandering vagabond ;
Thou'lt find on earth abundant room,
This great wide world around.
Henceforth thou ne'er shall know a home,
But wander east and west,
Unhappy o'er the earth to roam—
IMMUNE ART THOU TO DEATH.
Oft for a sign pressed me thou hard,
With insults cruel and bold,
So this to thee be my last word :
Thou'lt know the truth as told !'
"Could I forget that parting look,
And could I quit this strife—
This weight that on my soul I took,
And could I quit this life.
When wilt thou come Immanuel ?
Though young, yet old am I,
An age I've lived, to me it seems,
And yet, I cannot die."

Canto VI

MAGIC IMploRED

A WEIRD witch in magic spell,
Ben Israel sought, in grief and tears.
'T was said her cauldron could foretell,
The fate of souls through future years.
Her fame was known through centuries ;

[Eleven]

Condemned to Live

Her weird dance—enchanting song,
Was known to many countries;
Her cauldron smoked the whole day long.

“Why tremble I like aspen leaves?”
Ben Israel asked, with troubled eye,
“Upon my soul I most believe
That I would be afraid to die;
But thoughts of witches in their ire,
To me have ever been a fear.
Burns now my brain as if afire,
As I toward her hut draw near.”
Called he aloud: “Hail, thou of fame,
Came I in search of thee afar—
Ben Israel, the Jew, my name,
Pray set thy hovel door ajar.”

“Enter thou Hebrew,” came the word,
“My cauldron spoke of thee this night;
Of thy foul deeds oft have I heard—
In magic spell have seen thy might.”

“Great witch,” spoke he of troubled eye,
“Tell me I pray, thou magic one,
When comes the time that I can die—
Or, when will the Messiah come?
Condemned am I to live in pain,
And wander in my fevered breath
Until Messiah comes again—
Seek I in vain, but find no death.

[*Twelve*]

Condemned to Live

Divine thou witch, in magic spell;
Yon cauldron watch close with thine eye;
Thy magic wisdom should foretell
How long, mayhap, when I can die."

The smoke curled 'round the cauldron old;
The jack-o-lantern burned but dim;
The mystic woman although bold,
Trembling threw the incense in:
"Great goblins Jew, who art thou—tell,
I see no death, but endless tears;
Upon my oath my magic spell
Says thou shalt live two thousand years."

"Ye Gods," said he, "condemned am I
Two thousand years to roam. I must
Endure all hell before I die,
And worse, my punishment is just.

REMINISCENCE

Canto VII

"**I**'M OLD, and stooped and gray,
Heavens how slow the day,
When sweet relief in death
to me shall come
The three-score-years-and-ten,
Allotted out to men,

[Thirteen]

Condemned to Live

An age ago passed by
and still I roam.

The tongues of many lands,
A gift has been most grand,
I've talked with all mankind
o'er land and foam.

A wanderer I have been—
This great wide world have seen,
But since that day
have never known a home.

Ye stars, what I have seen,
The places I have been,
The bivouacs oft made
neath heaven's dome.

A crust were oft a feast,
A sunbeam from the east,
In winter is a boon
to keep me warm.

My people when besieged,
By Titus, oh that siege—
A hundred thousand souls
then went to heaven.

Saw I it all that year,
Braved it without fear,
For longed I still that
death to me be given.

The battle of the Huns—
Four Hundred Fifty-one—
Saw I that bloody siege
called 'scourge of God.'

Condemned to Live

All battles for the right,
My lot both day and night,
To see the millions
 often find the sod.
Great nations in their pride,
Before my eyes have died,
And sunk down into depths
 of rank decay.
As each new land was known,
My wandering self has flown
To find repose, but nothing
 came my way.
When men, in ignorant rage
Entered the dark age,
My body had have freely
 found the rack.
The mind of man was lost,
In heresy was tossed;
To me it seemed heaven's light
 would ne'er come back.
But, lo a light did burn,
When men began to learn;
Great spirit called 'reformers'
 known to fame,
Gave men free speech and thought:
The truths of heaven taught,
While millions freely lisped
 Messiah's name.
Were I to stop and tell
In one unbroken spell,

Condemned to Live

What I have seen and heard
 through all these tears,
The largest book on earth
Would scarcely hold its truth,
To read it would require
 unnumbered years.
Ye gods, but it seems long—
Centuries this same song.
When cometh He that I might
 end this woe?
These centuries of pain,
Had heaven not helped my brain,
My reason had have gone
 long, long ago."

Canto VIII

YULETIDE

"**I** WAS in America's favored land,
Not many years ago, 't is said,
That Christmas eve had come to hand,
And children their night prayers had said.
Stockings, seven in a row,
With notes to Santa Claus so dear;
Each child dreamed on and fain would
 know—
This mystic Santa caused some fear.
Mother and father in their love,
Has sorted presents o'er and o'er;
Hearts were attuned to heaven above,

[Sixteen]

Condemned to Live

As three faint raps came at the door.
"What soul dare pass this bitter night,"
The father asked, "and come this way?
Will human form this blizzard fight
Tonight? 'T were bad enough by day."
The good wife stirred the embers low,
While father opened wide the door.
A long haired, withered type of woe,
Benumbed, fell headlong to the floor.
"Heavens wife, who here does come
This bitter night and brave the storm?
"Speak man and tell me why you roam?
Tell who you are and where you're from?"
No answer came, the aged sire,
Most frozen stiff—his speech was gone.
Strong arms then placed him near the
fire—
Old bandages and rags undone.

A gracious gleam came from an eye
Far set back in his aged head—
Restored at length, a heavy sigh
The silence broke, at last he said:
"Ben Israel, the Jew, am I,
Condemned to live and roam the earth;
'Till Christ returns I can not die.
May I enjoy your yuletide mirth?
This Santa Claus of mystic fame,
Who this night covers land and sea,
May I tomorrow bear his name,
From myths, you know, he looks like me."

Condemned to Live

"Dear wife, can I believe my eyes?
Do Santa myths contain no flaws?
This man is someone in disguise,
Else he is really Santa Claus."

"T is no disguise, upon my word,"
The good wife said. "My fears all flee;
This old white-bearded form so hard,
Our Santa Claus this night shall be."

A cup of milk all steaming hot,
And dainty viands so freely given,
The Jew his sentence soon forgot—
Such hospitality were a heaven.

The weird Santa did his task;
All stockings filled, and prayers were said;
A fire place mat was all he asked;
For once he found a downy bed.
With ecstasy his soul was full,
For heaven had the past removed—
His heart-string pangs had ceased to pull,
And all the world was wonderous love.

Dawned the gray morn, Ben Israel
The fire-place sought, with quiet step;
Gazed fondly at the stockings full
That filled his soul with happiness.
One call from father, then a bound
Brought seven small children from their
beds;

Condemned to Live

Filled stockings grasped, the presents
found—

E'en dolls and dishes, skates and sleds.
Then saw they Santa in the rear
In shabby clothes—face old and red.
Each stood in trembling awe and fear,
'Till Santa smiled and softly said :
“Dear children, I am Santa Claus ;
Two thousand years have roamed the earth.
Spend I the day with you, because,
This is a day of joyous mirth.
Though old am I and shaggy white,
Through blizzard snow and wind I came,
And found you in the darkest night,
To bring you toys and join your games.”

Then joined they in a merry dance—
The feebled Jew was in the ring,
As parents to the room advanced
And lisped soft words to Christ their King.

Ben Israel, that live-long day,
A child with children seemed to be ;
Joined in each merry roun-de-lay ;
From age and care was truly free.
To share life in a happy home,
The first time near two thousand years ;
A blissful hour from earth's wide roam—
A day of joy in lieu of tears.

Condemned to Live

Canto IX

REMORSE

“**Y**E HEAVENS, once more I’m alone,
My wandering heart said I should
 roam,
Out through the world without a home,
 In one unbroken spell.
The heaven I passed but yesterday,
With merry children’s roun-de-lay,
Is gone for aye. That happy day
 Adds fuel to my great hell.

“More fierce the fire within my breast,
Burns on and on, there is no rest.
Condemned to live—immune to death,
 Live on in pain I must.
The more I see of this broad life,
The deeper cut my chains of strife,
More keen the edge than Shylock’s knife,
 And worse, my hell is just.

“My wicked deeds of shame and sin,
Two thousand years, a flame has been
Eating at my great within
 In one grim monotone.
Oftimes I close my eyes to see,
If this within will only flee,
But nay—those deeds of Calvary
 More vividly are shown.

[Twenty]

Condemned to Live

"Burns on my soul both nights and days,
Those deeds are on my mind always.
The truest hell in simple lays,
 A tortured mind contains.
A saintly face does bruise my soul,
When righteous men reach near the goal,
To think that I have lost the whole,
 It almost turns my brain.

"You Christians preach of brimstone's
 fire—
Of souls condemned therein to mire,
But such a fate would be much higher
 Than my eternal spell.
My fire within puts that to shame.
A haunted mind—an endless flame,
Is true, the clearest I can name,
 Or picture out real hell.

"This cursed gnawing in my heart,
Forever like a piercing dart;
Man's conscience is his greatest part,
 This truth to you I tell.
Like sharp knives piercing through and
 through,
Are pangs each moment, fresh and new;
What ere I see, what ere I do,
 Where ere I go is hell."

Condemned to Live

ADMONITION

“**T**O ALL mankind throughout the earth,
E'en though your station great or
small,

Would that my voice could reach you all,
That I might teach some well earned truth.

“Learned well have I through years of woe,
The drama of this mortal life;
How men contend through useless strife,
For paltry wealth, so soon to go.

“Unscrupulous, find I mankind;
Ingratitude stalks throughout the race.
Men's deeds would blush the Master's
face,
While Mercy sadly weeps behind.

“Build thou more stately mansions man,
Than builded I in days of yore,
Or hell's grim hand will ope' your door;
Your conscience all life's deeds will scan.

“For wrong deeds, you will pay the whole;
Regrets and sorrow yours will be;
Sin makes a bondman of the free;
Ignites a fire within the soul.

“Then let your life be pure and sweet;
Your very being fill with love.

[Twenty-two]

Condemned to Live

Such life will lead to heaven above,
And claim a crown at Jesus' feet.

"To others deal but righteousness,
And pray, follow not passion's spell—
That seed of fire—that burn of hell,
But merit heaven's blessedness.

"Live lives your souls can face with joy;
Shun every act that breeds remorse.
The burn of each new sin grows worse;
Live then as gold without alloy."

HOPE AND SUPPLIANCE

“**M**ETHINKS the time is drawing nigh;
My throbbing heart still urges yet.
When Christ comes, I'll have paid the
debt,
And oh, sweet boon, I then can die.

"Some day my worn out frame may fall
Upon the threshold of your door.
Please treat me kind—I'm old and poor,
The Christ cursed Jew, Ben Israel."

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